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DE RUEHKKH #1908/01 3380828
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 040828Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 9426

UNCLAS KHARTOUM 001908

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/SPG, AF/E

SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [SU](#)

SUBJECT: BEJA CONGRESS: WE NEED INVESTMENT IN THE EAST

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In an introductory call with CDA on December 3, Beja Congress president and Presidential Advisor Dr. Amna Dirar stressed the need for investment in the eastern states of Kassala, Gedarif and Red Sea to promote development in the impoverished region ("Now, it's just us and the sun"). CDA concurred with the need to increase awareness of the region, noting that issues in Darfur and the south absorbed virtually all international attention. Dr. Dirar also discussed the relatively positive status of ESPA implementation during the meeting. End summary.

ESPA GENERALLY ON TRACK

¶2. (SBU) Dr. Dirar characterized implementation of the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) in generally positive terms, saying that the three broad protocols agreed to were largely on track. The ESPA, signed in October 2006 and the most recent of Sudan's peace agreements, calls for cooperation in power-sharing, economic/social and security arrangements. She said that the integration of former Eastern Front combatants into the Sudanese armed forces and military academies was proceeding, though development and reconstruction plans had only been completed the day before. (Note: In previous meetings with poloffs, presidential assistant and Eastern Front chairperson Mousa Ahmed expressed similar views. End note.)

INVESTMENT CRITICAL FOR EAST'S FUTURE

¶3. (SBU) The ESPA also called for US 100 million in development funding in 2007 (US 600 million in total through 2011), she said, which was slowly forthcoming. Development priorities were being decided by local administrators in the three states; key priorities included primary healthcare, access to education and clean drinking water. Dr. Dirar emphasized how barren and poor the region was, quoting the late John Garang as telling her, "You don't even have trees!" Women still died in childbirth, she said, and the mortality rate for children under five was the highest in the country. CDA agreed that it was essential to address basic economic needs in the east, an area in many ways more destitute and marginalized than Darfur. Noting Red Sea State's long coastline, Dr. Dirar said the area was ripe for investment in fisheries, agriculture and even tourism. She also thought that a free trade zone could be developed there.

¶4. (SBU) CDA asked if U.S. sanctions in Sudan affected investment in the east. Dr. Dirar said that sanctions had scared off potential investors, and told CDA that the east should be exempt from sanctions as were Darfur and the south. She admitted that Port Sudan has seen development but that city "is really part of Khartoum" not the east, especially the desperately impoverished rural east. She compared Chinese investment in the area to a "giant rat that eats everything." The east needs factories, skills/capacity building and greater access to education, she said, adding that the east had the

potential to rival the Gulf.

¶5. (SBU) The lack of infrastructure and basic necessities had also prevented many refugees from returning after the ESPA was signed, she told CDA. Port Sudan was an exception to the poverty prevalent in the region, she added. CDA noted that while the US provided support in the east through NGOs, there was no direct funding. The US should view the east as a distinct entity, like the south and Darfur, and not just part of the "rest" of Sudan, he said, telling Dr. Dirar that he hoped the US would develop special programs targeted at the east although Darfur and the South would remain as main concerns of the U.S.

FROM ARMED GROUP TO POLITICAL PARTY

¶6. (SBU) On the Eastern Front coalition of the Rashaida Free Lions and the Beja Congress, Dr. Dirar said that it was very difficult to make the transition from an armed group to a political party. She said that the Eastern Front differed from other movements (like the SLM and SPLM) in Sudan in that it was truly comprehensive; the party included all the tribes of the east, she said, and not just Rashaida or Beja. Both parties wanted to change their names so as to be more inclusive to other eastern ethnic groups. When CDA asked whether the Eastern Front had participated in any political party training, Dr. Dirar said that it had been tried in Asmara, but "people were afraid." This is a sensitive subject, she noted, but Eritrea is not a good model for us because it is a one-party state. Eritrea had played an influential role in the Beja Congress, she said; when the CDA asked her about the Hadendewa tribe, she said that Eritrean pressure had led them to be expelled from the congress in 1994 because they were seen as too Islamist. Islamism didn't depend on ethnicity, CDA noted, but on ideology. Dr. Dirar agreed, saying "We're proud of our democratic minds in the east."

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The most recent of Sudan's three peace agreements, the ESPA seems not to have been plagued by the acrimony and distrust associated with the CPA and DPA. This may be because the ESPA hasn't benefited - or suffered - from the same international and domestic scrutiny. While implementation has been slow, Eastern Front representatives have taken up their allocated positions in local and national government. The region is arguably the most underdeveloped in the country, and it is critical that we begin to look at how we can support its development. Post will reach out to additional contacts in/from the east to deepen our reporting on this region, which often gets sidelined due to Darfur and CPA reporting, while realizing that our main focus will remain elsewhere. End comment.

FERNANDEZ